



"I'm Gonna Let it Shine! Justice!"

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

Saturday & Sunday, February 1 & 2, 2020

The Reverend John H. Brock
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1-12

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

What is justice? What does it mean to be just? In simple words, "justice" is to be morally right and fair. To be "just" is to treat people equally, the way that we would want ourselves to be treated in similar situations.

Our psalmist laid it out a definition for us. Those who are just are the ones who:

*Those who walk blamelessly,
Those who do what is right,
Those who speak the truth from their heart;
Those who do not slander Who do no evil to their friends,
Those who do not take up a reproach against their neighbors;
Those who stand by their oath even to their hurt;*

How many of us can say that we do more than, perhaps, simply a couple of those?

Let me ask us all this uncomfortable question: Do you think **you** are just? Do you think **I'm** just? We've heard an explanation of justice. We've heard the Psalmist attempting to describe what it means to be just. In our gospel reading, Jesus goes through what I think, is a whole list of traits that we could really say are all "justice" traits:

*those who are poor in spirit;
those who are meek;
those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;
the ones who are merciful;
those who are pure in heart;
the ones who are peacemakers;*

Part of the difficulty with those, though, is, do we really understand what is meant by them? I mean, come on, meek? Don't ya really mean nerd? Poor in spirit? Isn't that code for a someone who is *little bit too simple*?

This is how Eugene Peterson translated Matthew 5 in **The Message**:

*You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope.
You're blessed when you're content with just who you are – no more, no less.
You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God.
You're blessed when you care.
You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right.*

You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight.

Those are a little more relatable. We can understand those concepts a bit better. We comprehend "being at the end of our rope." We know what that's like. And we can comprehend "justice" when we think in terms of being at the end of our own rope, and how we would like others to deal with us, how we would want others to treat us, and therefore, how we ought to treat others when *they* are at the end of *their* ropes. We understand what it means, we know what it feels like, to get our own *inside world*, our own *mind and heart—put right*. And justice is then when we help others get to that place as well.

I feel, though, that here in the United States, we have a bad habit of equating justice with law. The law says such and such, so it must be right. Unfortunately, I think, the law is not always just. And it is not always fair. Look up the number of individuals that have been released from prison, cleared of crimes that they were convicted of, and are now free because of DNA testing. The law said someone committed a crime, and so someone was a guilty party. An individual was convicted. Therefore, justice has been served. Except, what if the person convicted was **not** the person who committed the crime?

I think that plays into one of the many reasons so many of us struggle with police involved shootings. We want to believe that police are acting in the best interest of us all, that they're upholding the law. And so, when they are involved in a shooting, our first inclination is to want to believe the one who was shot was doing something bad, that the individual involved was breaking the law.

An incident came up in my newsfeed, as I was working on this message, and it was a tweet that made me feel it was appropriate for this message. There was a police involved shooting this past week, outside of Washington, DC. An intoxicated driver hit multiple automobiles, and police were notified. When they arrived, officers detained the man, handcuffing him and placing him in the front seat of the patrol car, while they waited for the drug recognition expert to arrive. At some point, one of the officers got into the front of the vehicle as well and began talking with the man. Sometime during that conversation, the man was shot. He later died at a hospital. A relative subsequently tweeted:

All cops aren't bad, but those were. I will fight with the last breath in me for justice.

None of us here know what happened in that police car. I do know that the officer involved has been charged. Yet all too often, I fear, we confuse justice with revenge.

Years ago, I read the book *Waterlily*, by Ella Cara Deloria. She wrote a fictional telling about growing up among her own Lakota Sioux people in the mid-1800's, in what today we know as the Dakota's. At one point in the narrative, one young man kills another (over a woman), and his murder is then avenged by a relative. Waterlily and her extended family talk about the killings, and the discussion gets around to what one of the elders calls the "kinship appeal."

The family of the *slain* man calls for the death of the killer – we can understand that. The elders get together, and after discussion, they determine the fate of the killer: that young

man is to leave the family and clan of his birth and join the family and clan of the one whom he killed. He is to take on the other's life, live in the household with the other's parents, and in all respects be son & brother & nephew to his new people.

Deloria wrote:

...they accepted what their elder kinsman said, because they saw that it was right. They saw it as easy enough to fight violence with violence. Killing was the work of a moment. But to take the murderer as a relative, after what he had done, and to live in sincerity and creative goodwill with him, day in and day out to the end of life – that was something else.

Ella Cara Deloria, Waterlily, University of Nebraska Press 1988, p. 193

That, the elders determined, was justice. The family who lost a son, gains a new son. The family whose son caused the loss does not also experience a physical loss.

So, let me ask you again: do you think that you are just? I have to admit that I think that, generally, I am **not** very just. I am all too often revenge orientated, and judgmental. We know that from my driving etiquette. I'm really not all that *just*.

The psalmist calls us to:

*walk blamelessly; Well, I know I don't drive blamelessly, so I can't honestly claim this.
speak the truth from your heart; okay, that one I think I can say I strive for.
do not slander with your tongue; I don't slander, but I do know I'm often not very
nice when I talk about folks behind their backs.
do no evil to your friends; This one I can honestly say, I do strive to **not** be evil.
honor those who fear the LORD; Alright, this one, yes, this is one I can say I do
endeavor to attain.*

May we **all** learn how to *turn off* the revenge and Judgement and allow God's justice shine through us! Amen.

Copyright © 2020, John H. Brock. All rights reserved.



www.trinitycamphill.org